

CHAPTER 6
COVERED WAGES

[Prior to 6/9/04, see 581—Ch 21]

495—6.1(97B) IRS requirements. Wages as discussed in this chapter shall not exceed the amount permitted for a given year under Section 401(a)(17) of the Internal Revenue Code.

495—6.2(97B) Definition of wages. “Wages” means all compensation earned by employees including, except as otherwise provided under this chapter, vacation pay; sick pay; bonus payments; back pay; dismissal pay; amounts deducted from the employee’s pay at the employee’s discretion for tax-sheltered annuities, dependent care and cafeteria plans; and the cash value of wage equivalents. This definition applies to these rules, regulations, interpretations, forms and other IPERS publications unless the context otherwise requires.

495—6.3(97B) IPERS coverage for various forms of compensation. The following is a list of various types of compensation and the corresponding IPERS coverage treatment:

6.3(1) *Vacation pay or annual leave pay.* Vacation pay or annual leave pay means the amount paid to an employee during a period of vacation.

6.3(2) *Sick pay.* Sick pay means payments made for sick leave which are a continuation of salary payments.

6.3(3) *Workers’ compensation payments and other third-party payments.* Workers’ compensation payments, unemployment payments, or short-term and long-term disability payments made by an insurance company or third-party payer, such as a trust, are not included as wages. Payments for sick leave which are a continuation of salary payments if paid from the employer’s general assets, regardless of whether the employer labels the payments as sick leave, short-term disability, or long-term disability, are covered wages.

6.3(4) *Compensatory time.* Wages include amounts paid for compensatory time taken in lieu of regular work hours or when paid as a lump sum. However, compensatory time paid in a lump sum shall not exceed 240 hours per employee per year or any lesser number of hours set by the employer. Each employer shall determine whether to use the calendar year or a fiscal year other than the calendar year when setting its compensatory time policy.

6.3(5) *Banked holiday pay.* If an employer codes banked holiday time as holiday or additional accrued vacation time, the banked holiday pay will be vacation pay under subrule 6.3(1). If an employer codes banked holiday time as compensatory time, the banked holiday pay will be combined with compensatory pay and subject to the limits set forth in subrule 6.3(4).

6.3(6) *Special lump sum payments.* Wages do not include special lump sum payments made during or at the end of service as a payoff of unused accrued sick leave or of unused accrued vacation. Wages do not include special lump sum payments made during or at the end of service as an incentive to retire early or as payments made upon dismissal, severance, or a special bonus payment intended as an early retirement incentive. Wages do not include: catastrophic leave paid in a lump sum, recruitment bonuses, tips or honoraria. Exclusion of payments as described in this subrule applies whether the payment is in a lump sum or in installments.

6.3(7) Other special payment arrangements. Wages do not include amounts paid pursuant to special arrangements between an employer and employee whereby the employer pays increased wages and the employee reimburses the employer or a third-party obligor for all or part of the wage increase. This limitation includes, but is not limited to, the practice of increasing an employee's wages by the employer's share of health care costs and having the employee reimburse the employer or a third-party provider for such health care costs. Wages do not include amounts paid pursuant to a special arrangement between an employer and employee whereby wages in excess of the covered wage ceiling for a particular year are deferred to one or more subsequent years. Wages do not include employer contributions to a plan, program or arrangement that are not included in the employee's federal taxable income. However, certain employer contributions under IRC Section 125 plans are permitted to be treated as covered wages under rule 495—6.5(97B) subject to the terms of that rule.

Employers and employees that knowingly and willfully enter into the types of arrangements described in this subrule, causing an impermissible increase in the payments authorized under Iowa Code chapter 97B, may be prosecuted under Iowa Code section 97B.40 for engaging in a fraudulent practice. If IPERS determines that its calculation of a member's monthly benefit includes amounts paid under an arrangement described in this subrule, IPERS shall recalculate the member's monthly benefit, after making the appropriate wage adjustments. IPERS may recover the amount of overpayments caused by the inclusion of the payments described in this subrule from the monthly amounts plus interest payable to the member or amounts payable to the member's successor(s) in interest, regardless of whether or not IPERS chooses to prosecute the employers and employees under Iowa Code section 97B.40.

6.3(8) Wage equivalents. Items such as food, lodging and transportation are includable as employee income, if they are paid as compensation for employment. The basic test is whether or not such wage equivalent was given for the convenience of the employee or employing unit. Wage equivalents are not reportable under IPERS if given for the convenience of the employing unit or are not reasonably quantifiable. Wage equivalents that are not included in the member's federal taxable income shall be deemed to be for the convenience of the employer. A wage equivalent is not reportable if the employer certifies that there was a substantial business reason for providing the wage equivalent, even if the wage equivalent is included in the employee's federal taxable income. Wages paid in any other form than money are measured by the fair market value of the meals, lodging, travel or other wage equivalents.

6.3(9) Members of the general assembly. Wages for a member of the general assembly means the total compensation received by a member of the general assembly, whether paid in the form of per diem or annual salary. Wages include per diem payments paid to members of the general assembly during interim periods between sessions of the general assembly. Wages do not include expense payments except that, effective July 1, 1990, wages include daily allowances to members of the general assembly for nontravel expenses of office during a session of the general assembly. Such nontravel expenses of office during a session of the general assembly shall not exceed the maximum established by law for members from Polk County. A member of the general assembly who has elected to participate in IPERS shall receive four quarters of service credit for each calendar year during the member's term of office, even if no wages are reported in one or more quarters during a calendar year.

6.3(10) Wages paid as a back pay settlement. IPERS contributions must be calculated on the gross amount of a back pay settlement before the settlement is reduced for taxes, interim wages, unemployment compensation, and similar mitigation of damages adjustments. IPERS contributions must be calculated by reducing the gross amount of a back pay settlement by any amounts not considered covered wages such as, but not limited to, lump sum payments for medical expenses.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, a back pay settlement that does not require the reinstatement of a terminated employee and payment of the amount of wages that would have been paid during the period of severance (before adjustments) shall be treated by IPERS as a "special lump sum payment" under subrule 6.3(6) and shall not be covered.

6.3(11) *Wages restored following mandatory or voluntary reduction in hours.* Notwithstanding rule 495—6.4(97B), wages restored following the receipt of contributions forwarded pursuant to 2002 Iowa Acts, chapter 1135, section 36, shall be credited to quarters in which they would have been received but for voluntary or employer-mandated reduction in hours (EMRH).

6.3(12) *Wages for certain testing purposes.* Wages for testing purposes to ensure compliance with Internal Revenue Code Section 415 shall include a member's gross wages, excluding nontaxable fringe benefits and all amounts placed in tax-deferred vehicles including, but not limited to, plans established pursuant to Internal Revenue Code Sections 125, 401(k), 403, and 457, and excluding IPERS contributions paid after December 31, 1994, by employers on behalf of employees. Effective January 1, 1996, the annual wages of a member taken into account for testing purposes under any of the applicable sections of the Internal Revenue Code shall not exceed the applicable amount set forth in Internal Revenue Code Section 401(a)(17), and any federal regulations promulgated pursuant to that section. The foregoing sentence shall not be deemed to permit the maximum amount of wages of a member taken into account for any other purpose under Iowa Code chapter 97B to exceed the maximum covered wage ceiling under Iowa Code section 97B.1A(26). Effective January 1, 1998, wages for testing purposes to ensure compliance with Internal Revenue Code Section 415 shall include elective deferrals placed in tax-deferred plans established pursuant to Internal Revenue Code Sections 125, 401(k), 403, and 457 by employers on behalf of employees.

495—6.4(97B) Quarter for which wages are to be reported. Wages are reportable in the quarter in which they are actually paid to the employee, except when employees are awarded lump sum payments of back wages, whether as a result of litigation or otherwise, wage restorations following EMRH, and similar situations authorized under Iowa Code chapter 97B, in which case the employer shall file wage adjustment reporting forms with IPERS allocating said wages to the periods of service for which such payments are awarded. Employers shall forward the required employer and employee contributions and interest to IPERS.

6.4(1) *Actual and constructive receipt.* An employer cannot report wages as having been paid to employees as of a quarterly reporting date if the employee has not actually or constructively received the payments in question. For example, wages that are mailed, transmitted via electronic funds transfer for direct deposit, or handed to an employee on June 30 would be reported as second quarter wages, but wages that are mailed, transmitted via electronic funds transfer for direct deposit, or handed to an employee on July 3 would be reported as third quarter wages.

6.4(2) One quarter of service will be credited for each quarter in which a member is paid IPERS covered wages.

a. "Covered wages" means wages of a member during periods of service that do not exceed the annual covered wage maximum as permitted for a given year under Section 401(a)(17) of the Internal Revenue Code.

b. Effective January 1, 1988, covered wages shall include wages paid a member regardless of age. (From July 1, 1978, until January 1, 1988, covered wages did not include wages paid a member on or after the first day of the month in which the member reached the age of 70.)

c. If a member is employed by more than one employer during the calendar year, the total amount of wages paid shall be included in determining the annual covered wage maximum. If the amount of wages paid to a member by several employers during a calendar year exceeds the covered wage limit, the amount of the excess shall not be subject to contributions required by Iowa Code section 97B.11.

495—6.5(97B) Covered wage treatment for employer contributions to IRC Section 125 plans. If certain conditions are met, employer contributions to fringe benefit programs that qualify under IRC Section 125 may be treated as covered wages. The following subrules set forth IPERS' regulations for determining covered wage treatment and for making wage adjustments when employer-paid contributions have been covered or excluded in violation of the standards set forth below.

6.5(1) Section 125 plans. For purposes of this rule, a Section 125 plan means an employer-sponsored fringe benefit plan that is subject to Section 125 of the federal Internal Revenue Code. Some of the common names for this type of plan are cafeteria plan, flexible benefits plan, flex plan, and flexible spending arrangement.

6.5(2) Elective employer contributions. For purposes of this rule, "elective employer contributions" means employer contributions made to a Section 125 plan that can be received in cash or used to purchase benefits under the Section 125 plan. Generally, elective employer contributions that are not subject to special eligibility requirements qualify as covered wages.

6.5(3) Mandatory minimum coverage requirements. The term "elective employer contributions" does not include employer contributions that must be used to purchase benefits under a Section 125 plan. For example, if an employer provides \$2,500 to its employees to purchase benefits in a Section 125 plan, but requires that all employees must use \$1,000 of that amount to purchase single health coverage, the cost of the single coverage is deducted. In this example, \$1,000 would be subtracted from the \$2,500 provided, resulting in \$1,500 of covered wages.

6.5(4) Uniformity determined coverage group by coverage group. Iowa Code section 97B.1A(26) "a"(1)"b" states that elective employer contributions shall be treated as covered wages only if made uniformly available and not limited to highly compensated employees. The application of the uniformity concept may be illustrated as follows: Employer Z has two major groupings of employees covered under its cafeteria plan: teaching staff and support staff. Every member of the teaching staff is provided \$3,000 to purchase benefits under the Section 125 plan. Every member of the teaching staff must take single coverage costing \$1,500. Every member of the support staff is provided \$2,500 and must also take the single coverage costing \$1,500. Each member of the teaching staff would have \$1,500 treated as covered wages, and each member of the support staff would have \$1,000 treated as covered wages. This would be considered uniform treatment.

Uniformity is not destroyed by the fact that the amount available to members of a coverage group varies because the actual cost of mandatory minimum coverage varies depending on actuarial factors that apply to each individual. For example, assume Employer Z above also requires each employee to have long-term disability coverage. In Employer Z's case, the actual cost of disability coverage will vary from individual to individual. In that case, Employer Z would also deduct the actual cost of the required disability coverage, individual by individual, when determining IPERS covered wages.

Uniformity is not destroyed if an employer has two groups of employees who, as a result of collective bargaining, have differing entitlements to employer contributions. For example, Employer Y has a contract that provides \$3,500 to each employee to purchase benefits under the Section 125 plan. Every employee may take all the cash by waiving participation in the plan, or may use all or part of the employer contributions to the Section 125 plan. In the collective bargaining process, a new contract is adopted which states that the employer will still provide \$3,500 to each employee to purchase benefits under the Section 125 plan. However, under the new contract, persons who waived participation before April 15 may still waive participation in the plan and take all the cash, but persons who did not waive participation and those hired after April 15 must have single coverage costing \$1,700. Employer Y would be treated as having two groups of employees with different elective employer contribution amounts. The grandfathered group (employees who waived participation before April 15) would have covered wages of \$3,500, and the group consisting of those who did not waive participation before April 15 and new employees would have covered wages of \$1,800.

6.5(5) Highly compensated employee test. Iowa Code chapter 97B provides that, in addition to being uniformly available, employer contributions must not discriminate in favor of highly compensated employees (HCEs). For purposes of this subrule, an HCE is an employee who has reported wages and tips subject to Medicare tax in excess of the IRC Section 414(q) limit then in effect. IPERS shall apply the HCE limitation as follows. If elective employer contributions are made available to HCEs, the total elective employer contributions made available to the HCE group must not exceed 25 percent of the total elective employer contributions made available under the Section 125 plan to all employees, including the HCEs. If the elective employer contributions available to the HCE group exceed the 25 percent limit (or if it is determined that the Section 125 plan discriminates in favor of HCEs under other IRS rules), elective employer contributions for HCEs shall not exceed the highest amount available to a nonexecutive coverage group of employees covered under such plan. The general application of these principles is illustrated below, using the 2002 IRC Section 414(q) dollar limit of \$90,000.

Employer W has a Section 125 plan that provides elective employer contributions totaling \$7,000 to executive staff, \$4,500 to teaching staff, and \$3,500 to support staff. There are no other limits or exclusions that apply. These amounts are treated as covered wages for each member of each group, provided that the total amount of contributions made available to HCEs does not exceed 25 percent of the total elective employer contributions for all employees covered under the plan. If elective employer contributions for the executive staff totaled \$70,000, and total elective employer contributions for the remainder of the staff totaled \$500,000, the HCE percentage of total elective employer contributions would be 12 percent (\$70,000 divided by \$570,000), and all elective employer contributions would be treated as covered wages for all groups. However, if elective employer contributions for the executive staff totaled \$70,000, and elective employer contributions for the remainder of the staff totaled \$200,000, the HCE percentage would be 26 percent (\$70,000 divided by \$270,000), and HCEs' elective employer contributions would be limited to \$4,500 per HCE for covered wage purposes.

6.5(6) Elective employer contributions limited to dual coverage employees. In some cases, a Section 125 plan provides for what appear to be mandatory employer contributions for health plan coverage, but the terms of the Section 125 plan permit dual coverage employees to waive coverage and receive the employer contributions in cash, if the employee can prove coverage under another health care plan. IPERS shall continue to treat the full amount of employer contributions in such cases as not being IPERS covered wages, even though individual employees with the described dual coverage may actually receive the employer contribution in cash.

6.5(7) Corrections for overpayments and underpayments of contributions and benefits caused by Section 125 plan covered wage errors. IPERS shall use the following guidelines in requiring corrections for overpayments and underpayments of contributions and benefits caused by the erroneous inclusion or exclusion of employer contributions to a Section 125 plan. Corrections must be made for all active, terminated and retired members, subject to the following limitations:

a. If elective employer contributions that should have been covered were not covered, wage adjustments shall be filed, and employers shall be billed for all shortages plus interest. Employers shall be entitled to collect reimbursement for the employee share of contributions as provided in Iowa Code section 97B.9. If retirement benefits, death benefits or refunds have been underpaid as a result of the error, IPERS shall, upon receipt of the contribution shortage, make the appropriate adjustments and pay all back benefits.

b. If employer contributions that should not have been covered were covered, wage adjustments shall be filed, and the appropriate contribution amounts shall be repaid to employers for distribution to the respective employee and employer contributors. If the reporting error caused an overpayment of retirement benefits, death benefits, or refunds, IPERS shall offset excess contributions received against overpayments and shall request a repayment of the remainder of the overpayment, if any, from the recipient.

Wage adjustments, overpayments, and underpayments and unintentional reporting errors shall be determined as of the onset of the error, but shall be limited to three years before the beginning of the current contract year for school employers, or current fiscal year for all other covered employers. IPERS may go back to the onset of the error, even if the period exceeds three years, if the error is caused by intentional misconduct or gross neglect. Notwithstanding the foregoing adjustment and collection standards, IPERS reserves the right to negotiate adjustments with individual employers in special situations, and no negotiated settlement with an employer shall be deemed to constitute a waiver of this rule or a binding precedent for other employers.

6.5(8) Bounties. In some cases, an employer has a Section 125 plan with employer contributions, and what IPERS refers to as a bounty option. A bounty is an amount that may be elected by all employees, or by a subset of that group, such as employees with coverage under another health care plan, either in lieu of any coverage under the employer's health care plan, or in lieu of family coverage. A bounty is generally set at an amount that is less than the amount that would otherwise be available to purchase benefits under the Section 125 plan. IPERS does not treat bounties as covered wages. The uniformity and nondiscrimination principles described in subrule 6.5(4) do not apply to such benefits.

These rules are intended to implement Iowa Code Supplement section 97B.1A(26).

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